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ABSTRACT

To understand the current emphasis on multicultural education, it is necessary to examine recent events which contributed to this movement and then to determine when multicultural education should begin in the formal education sequence. The pressure to implement ethnic studies programs has come from America's oppressed ethnic minority groups. The social unrest of the 1960s forced educators to establish programs to accommodate diverse needs of neglected minorities. The literature shows that children have well established prejudices even before entering school. It is therefore imperative to begin work with children as soon as possible before their prejudices and stereotypes become too firmly established. Further rationale for the early study of diversity is that during the student's impressionable early years he can be taught either conformity, to the detriment of meaningful living and learning, or he can be taught that personal identification and individuality are valuable assets. Schools must show that diversity is valued in personalities, backgrounds, cultures, and interests. Two of the curriculum areas in which this can be done are language arts and the social sciences. (Author/PLV)

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Educating for Cultural Diversity in the Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Elementary Schools have numerous advantages in using diversity to highlight intergroup education. A review of existing literature on this topic supports the fact that children have well-established prejudices even before entering school. It is therefore imperative to begin work with children as soon as possible before their prejudices and stereotypes become too firmly established.

Further rationale for this early study of members of various groups is that during the early, impressionable years of a student's life he can be taught conformity to the detriment of meaningful living and learning, or he can be taught through the experiences provided by the school that personal identification and individuality are valuable assets. It is here that schools must show that diversity is valued and fostered in personalities, backgrounds, cultures and interests.

This paper explores the methodology which can be used to better prepare the young child for active membership in a pluralistic society and examines the ways that a pluralistic education must prepare him both to understand the cultures in which he presently lives and to understand wider and more diverse cultures.

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Educating for Cultural Diversity in the Elementary Schools

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To understand the current emphasis on multicultural education - and therefore the future of such programs - it is necessary first to examine recent events contributing to this movement and then to determine where such emphasis should begin in the formal education sequence.

This paper attempts (1) to present an overview of recent trends in ethnic studies, (2) to establish a rationale for the beginning of such studies early in the elementary school years and (3) to explore the methodology which can be used to better prepare the young child for active membership in a pluralistic society.

Recent Trends in Multicultural Education

In recent years, educators have begun to realize the importance of ethnicity in American society and the need to help students to develop more sophisticated understandings of the diverse ethnic groups which make up America, and a greater tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences. Responding largely to student demands and community pressure groups, educational institutions at all levels have made some attempts to put more information about ethnic groups into the society studies, language arts, and humanities curricula.

The pressure to implement ethnic studies programs has come largely from America's oppressed ethnic minority groups, such as Afro-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto-Rican Americans. Because these groups have taken the lead in pushing for ethnic studies programs (White ethnics are increasingly making similar demands), educators have created ethnic studies

programs, largely in response to their demands and needs as they perceived them. Consequently, ethnic studies has been conceptualized rather narrowly.

The results of these kinds of narrowly conceptualized programs, even though the information which they teach students is essential, is that they rarely help students to develop specific generalizations and concepts about the characteristics which ethnic groups have in common, the unique status of each ethnic group, and to understand why ethnicity is an integral part of our social system.

Another factor contributing to the need for a broadly conceptualized multicultural education program can be traced back to the social unrest of the sixties. Because of this civil unrest educators were forced to move in the direction of establishing instructional programs that would accommodate the diverse needs of neglected racial and ethnic minorities. In an effort to meet the special needs of these students, various programs were created, such as compensatory education, ethnic studies, urban studies, Head Start, and others. Unfortunately, while each instructional program was conceived with a pluralistic philosophical base, the actual curriculum predominately included only one minority culture, usually that of the target student population to be served. The replacement of the "melting pot" theory with a genuine multicultural philosophy continues to be incomplete. As a result, educational programs founded under the concept of cultural pluralism, promoting diversity among peoples, continue to be restricted in scope. In a noticeable number of situations, programs ostensibly advocating cultural pluralism are functioning to resegregate students! These categorical models have allowed educators to separate some students from the "mainstream" and have encouraged educators themselves to think in a separatist and discriminating manner. What is truly needed now is a move to make the mainstream itself

culturally diverse. The core of multicultural education is the study of all people, their customs, history, traditions, values, belief, and aspirations.

These cited trends and other social conditions have given rise to the belief that multicultural education is not only appropriate, but it is necessary for the times facing the various, troubled world societies. As James Banks has written:

Events of the last decade have dramatically indicated that we live in a world society beset with momentous social and human problems, many of which are related to ethnic hostility and conflict. Effective solutions to these critical problems can be found only by an active, compassionate, and ethnically sensitive citizenry capable of making sound public decisions that will benefit our ethnically diverse world community. (1:32)

Beginning at the Beginning

The issue is often raised concerning the level that multicultural education should be introduced into the formal instructional program in order to foster the fundamental philosophy of cultural pluralism. The position taken here is that children should be involved in fully developed programs as early as the pre-school and certainly no later than kindergarten. To say, as many people do, that children are free of prejudice and hostility is just not true. Research in this area supports the fact that children have well-established prejudices even before entering school. (2:2-11), (3:192-195) In light of these discussions it becomes imperative to start as soon as possible to work with children before their prejudices and stereotypes become too firmly established. Elementary school children are in formative and inquisitive stages of learning to "be" and "feel" and "think." They are more easily motivated by new and interesting experiences and they do not have the inhibitions that older students do.

Young children are more apt to express original and unlearned responses, for they have not yet been taught that precocity is not tolerated; as a

matter of fact, in young children it is prized. In an older child, the same behavior or comment or observation may be considered impertinence by the adult world.

Elementary schools tend to be smaller, and more out of touch with larger neighborhoods except through television and other media. Therefore, it is important to do much more than the traditional neighborhood or community-worker study. However, the smallness of elementary schools helps the child become known as an individual and not as a member of a large mass. Elementary teachers, who teach more than one subject in heterogeneous classrooms, are more familiar with accepting children at all levels of achievement and working with more diverse abilities and talents. They also have unusual opportunities to see that experiences in various curriculum areas are complementary to each other and geared for the optimum growth and intellectual development of each student.

Many teachers, administrators, and other adults interested in the schools believe that if a classroom is made up exclusively of children belonging to one group, there can be no intergroup problems. This belief has become a rationale for resisting the introduction of curriculum materials which deal with interracial, interethnic or interreligious relations. There is a need, however, for multicultural education designed for one-group classrooms and multigroup classrooms. One of the most important reasons for teacher intergroup relations in the one-group classroom is to help the minority child cope with his immediate personal experience of prejudice and discrimination. Another reason is to help the children whose unrealistic self-images are based on implications in the world around them that they are superior because they are members of one race rather than another. Poor children of all races and background are caught in a seemingly endless cycle on

poverty, self-doubt, limited aspiration, lack of motivation, rationalization of failure and further poverty. If poor children can be helped to recognize that they can succeed, that the conditions of success are manageable and that they can develop skills which will enable them to achieve what they need, they can break out of the cycle of poverty. Attempts to abolish their prejudices, often a crucial part of their defense against hopelessness and self-rejection, would be irresponsible and probably unsuccessful, if not accompanied by an equal effort to develop the skills and motivation necessary to escape the cycle of poverty. But as long as people continue to see the world in terms of inferior and superior people and to evaluate others by their skin color, religion or nationality, they will overlook opportunities for their own development and advancement. Yes, intergroup education is needed, but not just for children in desegregated or integrated situations or those who live in multicultural domestic settings. It is also needed for middle class minority children, poor majority children, suburban children, poor minority children--all of our children.

During the early, impressionable years of a student's life, he can be taught conformity to the detriment of meaningful living and learning, or he can be taught through the experiences provided by the school that personal identification and individuality are valuable assets. It is here that schools should show by example that diversity is valued and fostered in personalities, backgrounds, cultures, and interests. It is at this time that educators should be involved in values clarification rather than indoctrination. It is here that inner feelings, self-images, and self-respect can be appreciated and encouraged so that when the tension-filled, peer dominated, and self-conscious years of pre-adolescence and the teens arrive, these attributes will stand the child in a good stead. When children arrive

at adolescence, these years are immeasurably complicated and confused if deflated self-images and inappropriate education in their homes, communities and schools have been their lot during earlier years.

The study of people as members of various groups seems essential from a child's first school experiences in the formal school setting. Because of his limited experiences with persons of many groups, the focus of intergroup education must prepare him both to understand the cultures in which he presently lives and to consider wider and more diverse cultures.

Plan of Action

If the experiences explored above are to be provided for the young child, what action must be planned for and undertaken by educators?

Literature explored indicates a few critical steps (4:200):

1. A humanistic attitude must dominate the curriculum and instruction.
2. Massive staff retraining programs must be launched.
3. Multicultural materials and resources must be developed.
4. Genuine community involvement must be enlisted and maintained.

Each of these steps is crucial in setting the stage for intergroup education. However, teachers of young children will need to be aware of instructional strategies which can be employed to provide a comprehensive multicultural education program which focuses on higher level concepts and generalizations and not on discrete facts about isolated heroes and contributions. While facts are necessary to help students to acquire higher levels of knowledge, their mastery should not be the ultimate goal of instruction. Rather, facts should be used as a means to teach major concepts and generalizations.

A few possible strategies are offered here for some curriculum areas. There are numerous others which can be employed as children mature to assist

them in achieving ethnic literacy.

A. Language Arts

Long before a child is able to read for himself what his feelings and his vocabulary have helped him think and say for a long time parents and teachers should read to and talk with children. These early experiences and impressions are the least forgotten and longest remembered. Communications has many manifestations.

1. Select stories, books and films that deliberately incorporate pluralistic themes.
2. In teaching any subject, it is important to use discussion and visual images to counteract stereotyping. Even today many beginning reading books, for instance, present the family as an exclusively white unit consisting of a father, mother, and two children who live in a community, generally rural or suburban, of people just like them. Valuing and using diversity implies presenting other realities about families through pictures and through analyzing many kinds of family concepts without passing value judgments. For example, what is a family? There are families with light skins and with dark skins; families with many children and with few children or one child; families with one parent, two parents, no parents, grandparents, or other assorted relatives and dependents. There are families who live in big houses, little houses, shacks, barracks, huts, caves, trailers, apartments and flats. They live in cities, slums, suburbs, and in rural areas. There are families who are wealthy, who are living on an adequate income, and who are poverty stricken. Since most study materials do not present family diversity, it is important to improvise so that these classifications are discussed, known, and acceptable concepts and facts of life.
3. When freed of adult expectations for perfect handwriting, spelling and grammar, children dictate and write wonderful continuations of phrases like these:
 - ... I felt left out when ...
 - ... Things I don't like about people ...
 - ... I'd like to move because ...
 - ... A mother is ...
 - ... A father is ...
 - ... A family is ...

... Love is ...
... Sadness is ...
... A city is ...
... Others dislike (or like) me because ...

4.. As children get older, consider these:

- a. Read to them and have them read biographies, fiction, drama, and poetry that feature feelings, attitudes, and problems of children from different racial and ethnic groups.
- b. Encourage children to vary their educational and reading diets with books that include biographies and autobiographies of persons of diverse origins and religions.
- c. Use folk tales and myths that contribute basic understandings about different people in other times and places, and help children see the reason for the myth compared to the reality.

B. The Social Sciences (5:117-120)

1. Living where we are

- a. Who are we and where do we live? How do we live and who are our neighbors? Familiarize children with the globe early, and its large components of land, water, climate, topography, and so forth. Help them locate themselves on both the globe and flat maps. Help them to identify with both their immediate and larger neighborhoods by mapping routes to school, neighborhoods, shops, nearest cities, etc. Include the school grounds and the interior of the school. Visit people like the custodian, school nurse, and the principal, to see where they are and what they do. Discuss and practice effective activities for interpersonal relations within the school and the neighborhood, including courtesy and respect for each other, friendliness and friendly curiosity, taking turns and sharing, consideration for others, privileges and responsibility, and facility use.
- b. Study different nationalities, religions, racial, and socioeconomic groups from which students, their ancestors, and their neighbors come. Have such study include:
 - Value of having many different kinds of people in a community.
 - Countries and areas from which they migrated.
 - Religious and racial origins.
 - Present and past neighborhoods.
 - Different languages, customs, religions, food, clothing, and so on.
 - Work done by various family members and dignity of all kinds of work.

--Recreation games, music, dancing.

2. Living where others live.

- a. From the earliest grades, children can understand some kinds of aspects of living in other places. The main criteria is that the picture of others parts of the country or world not be a stereotyped area, such as presenting Eskimos in igloos, Indians in tepees, and Africans in jungles or caves. There continues to be a great need for teaching materials that will meet these needs as well as media which is current, accurate and avoids stereotypes.
- b. Investigate schooling and education, determine problems and possible solutions.

There are many other activities which could be presented for science, mathematics, the arts and even health and physical education. However, time nor space allows that exploration here.

A final issue to be addressed relates to these suggested activities, and that is that the teacher must be trained and develop skill in incorporating such experiences into an already full curriculum design. Supervisors and administrators must be resensitized to the need for multi-ethnic education and provide the needed guidelines and support. Parents must be made aware of the value of such exploration and themselves will require orientation and involvement in the process.

This is a challenge, but one that must be met if we are to fully educate children for life in a culturally diverse society.

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